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SHALL WE GIVE BIBLES TO THREE MILLIONS  
OF AMERICAN SLAVES ?

It is more than thirty years since the American Bible Society was formed, for the purpose of supplying the whole people of the United States with the Holy Scriptures. Yet the great body of slaves, amounting to one-sixth of our population, are still unsupplied. And no systematic effort has ever been made to supply them. Is it not high time that an effort should be made to unite, for this purpose, the counsels and the charities of all who love the Bible, however diversified may be their views on other subjects ?

It is believed that the present is a favorable time for such an effort. The welfare of our churches, the increasing interest which is felt for the condition of the slaves, the state of public opinion, call for the proposal of this method of action in favor of the slaves. All religious men should cordially unite in this noble purpose, for it is clearly right and practicable, and purely benevolent and salutary to all parties, and it may lead all those who engage in it to cooperate in other well devised plans for the good of the oppressed.

If heartily undertaken, and earnestly pursued, in conjunction with other obvious duties with reference to the slaves, will it not restore to our churches those feelings of brotherly love, confidence and cooperation, which never fail to be followed by the outpouring of God's Spirit, and the extensive revival of true religion ?

The following considerations seem worthy of general attention :—

*I.—It is a sin to withhold the Bible from any.*

Says the Rev. Albert Barnes, in his late work on slavery :

"The withholding of instruction is forbidden in the New Testament. Nothing is more definite in the Bible, or more in accordance with all our views of what is proper and right, than the declarations that all men have a clear right to know the truth ; to receive instruction ; to have free access to the oracles of God. Luke xi. 52 : 'Woe unto you, lawyers! for ye have taken away the key of knowledge ; ye entered not in yourselves, and them that were entering in, ye hindered.' John v. 39 : 'Search the Scriptures, for in them ye think ye have eternal life, and they are they which testify of me.' Prov. xix. 2 : 'That the soul be without knowledge, it is not good.' " p. 361.

The Rev. E. N. Kirk, in a letter recently published, dated Boston, February 20, 1847, says: "No man, or body of men, has a right to prevent any human being from learning to read, and from reading the Word of God. And every human being has a commission from God to do all that is in his power to communicate that Word to every other human being. The fact that there are laws against it, whether in ancient Rome, or in modern Rome, in Mecca or in Charleston, in no way affects our duty; and he that hinders us in this good work, must answer to Christ for it."

The Bible Society of Charleston, S. C., in their thirty-fourth report, claim the circulation of the Bible as a common cause: "Regarding the work of Bible distribution as a great common cause,—unlimited by metes and bounds, an embodiment of efforts and means for furnishing to all mankind the counsels of the Most High,—and thus to lay the only sure foundation of all other Christian effort, whether personal or social; it is really both a privilege and a duty to be participants in the enterprise."

## II.—*The Bible is generally and intentionally withheld from the Slaves.*

1. The Rev. C. C. Jones, Presbyterian, in a sermon preached before the planters of Liberty county, Georgia, and published by them, in 1831, says, "We cannot cry out against the papists for withholding the Scriptures from the common people, for we withhold the Bible from our servants." In an essay, he says, "The statutes of our respective States forbid it, or when through oversight they do not, custom does. He cannot search the Scriptures, for a knowledge of letters he has not, and cannot legally obtain."

2. The Rev. J. S. Law, Baptist, in an essay prepared at the request of the Georgia Baptist Association, in 1846, says of the slaves:—"They have no access to the Word of God. We have taken under our own keeping the key of knowledge. They cannot read the Word of God; we are the cause of this inability. We permit them not to take into their own hands the lamp of life."

3. The Synod of South Carolina and Georgia, say in 1833, "In this Christian Republic there are over two millions of human beings in the condition of heathen; they have no Bibles."

4. The Synod of Kentucky say, that "access to the Scriptures" is not, "to any extent worth naming, enjoyed by slaves. The law, as it exists here, does not prevent free access

to the slaves, but ignorance, the natural result of their condition, does. The Bible is before them, but it is to them a sealed book."

5. The presbytery of New Orleans, say, that "of 100,000 of this class of people within our bounds, it may be safely asserted that 75,000 never hear the doctrine of salvation preached."

5. The presbytery of Alabama say, "The Bible, the precious fountain of life, is a sealed book to the black."

7. The Rev. G. W. Freeman, now Bishop of Texas, says, in a published sermon, that slave children ought to be baptised and taught orally the Lord's prayer, creed and commandments, but "it is not necessary they should be taught to read."

8. The Rev. Mr. Converse, of Vermont, formerly of Virginia, says in a sermon, that "those called field-hands live and die without being told by their pious masters that Jesus Christ died to save sinners."

### III.—*Everybody ought to have the Bible.*

1. The Mississippi Conference of the M. E. Church, in 1843, passed a resolve, that "the circulation of the Bible without note or comment, is, in all conceivable circumstances, indispensable to anything like eminent success in missionary effort."

2. The General Conference of the M. E. Church, South, in 1846, pledged its concurrence in the efforts of the American Bible Society, to place a copy of the Holy Bible in the hands of every man, woman and child in our own country."

3. The American Bible Society, at its anniversary in 1846, resolved, that "the Bible is for man a necessary of life."

4. The venerable Dr. Alexander has said, that "religious emotions and influences work upward; they begin with servants, children, and females, and thus reach those who are more difficult of access." This shows by what means we are to evangelize Southern society.

5. The Hon. Theodore Frelinghuysen, in his oration at New Brunswick, 1831, says, of the Bible, "It is a munition of rocks for all our social and civil privileges. Let its influence go forth and spread through the land, in its purity and power, and all outrage and crime, oppression and tyranny would retire before it."—p. 9.

### IV.—*The work ought to be done by the American Bible Society.*

1. The Mississippi Conference, 1843, expressly declared their "entire confidence in the integrity and catholic character

of the American Bible Society," and promised to "heartily countenance and coöperate with any accredited agent" of that Society.

2. At a meeting in New York, in 1835, Mr. Birney strongly advocated the measure, as calculated to do great good, especially in regard to the States of Kentucky and Tennessee, where no legal restrictions exist against the distribution of the Scriptures. If the work could be done in these States, other States would follow the example. And who should do this work, or attempt it, but the American Bible Society?

3. The Board of Managers of the American Bible Society, in 1834, declare in express reference to the slaves, their object to be "the circulation of the Holy Scriptures without note or comment among their destitute fellow men of every name and nation wherever they can be reached," and that they "will thankfully receive the contributions of all societies and individuals who may be disposed to coöperate with them in their benevolent undertaking." In 1835, they say they have "made on request, several small grants of the Scriptures for the benefit of colored people." In their report for 1845, they intimate "the readiness of the Board to coöperate, to the extent of their ability, in furnishing all who can read with the Book of Life, of every condition and color."

4. In their report for 1845, they detail their grants for prisons, and to seamen and boatmen, but specify none for slaves. In 1844, they mention gifts for the army and navy, for prisons, to Indians, soldiers, seamen, but not slaves. In 1846, they mention, pp. 5 and 9, specific grants of Bibles for prisons, Sunday schools, Swedes, seamen, ships of war, canals and lakes, Indians, and sundry others, but none for slaves. The reports of 1845 and 1846, contain acknowledgments of donations, in money, received expressly for the slaves, as well as for many other specific objects.

OBJ. 1.—*That the laws are against it.*

1. There is no law known against giving the Bible to the slaves, in at least six of the states, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee and Missouri; and no law in these states against teaching them to read. In Virginia, there is a law against collecting slaves in schools, but none against the instruction of individuals at home. Let us give the Bible to the slaves in those States, where there is no law against it, before we resort to the law as an apology for our neglect.

2. The Rev. Dr. Fuller, late of Beaufort, S. C., has published that these wicked laws "are most of them virtually

repealed by universal practice." He says of one of them, "Violate it most industriously." And in regard to the slaves' reading, "How many are taught." The laws, then, constitute no part of the difficulty in the way. Such wicked laws, in this country, must be dead as soon as they begin to be openly disregarded.

3. A correspondent of the Journal of Commerce at Savannah, July 7, 1845, says, "There is a law of the State prohibiting the instruction of slaves in writing and reading, and yet there is scarcely a family in which they are not thus instructed, or permitted to be instructed. I have resided in this community for thirty years, and have never heard of a prosecution for a violation of this law, although it was well known to the police of the city that public schools have been kept by colored persons for the instruction of that class. Why is this? for no other reason than that public sentiment was opposed to the law."

#### OBJ. 2.—*The slaves cannot read the Bible.*

Ans. 1. The Rev. D. Butler, at the 30th anniversary of the American Bible Society, said, "The books left there [among the destitute] may lie neglected for years, but they will one day make their influence felt. We have no right to say that the Bible, in any case whatever, does no good."

2. We never hear that objection alleged when any other class of persons are spoken of. The rule has always been to give to all who will receive and not abuse it.

3. Many can read. Some masters, and more mistresses, teach their house servants. Many slaves learn from the children of the family. They often keep their ability to read a secret from their masters.

4. In the 29th report of the American Bible Society, p. 51, is an extract of a communication from a female auxiliary society in Abingdon, Virginia, as follows:

"Several instances are given of Sabbath schools having been established in illiterate neighborhoods, through the instrumentality of *Bibles given to the poor and ignorant*. A father and mother, with their eight children, were induced to attend a Sabbath school in order to *learn to read, by presents of Bibles*. Many copies of Testaments and Psalms have been given to servants [slaves], and they have uniformly had the *desired influence of inducing them to learn to read*."

5. Giving the Bible is the best inducement to learn to read, and the best help for adults to learn. If you wish your son to learn to swim, you send him into the water.

6. Giving the Bible will open the way for all the other means, and will be followed by teachers, preachers, and Sabbath Schools.

7. The following narrative, from the American Messenger, published by the Tract Society, shows that colporteurs are laboriously spending days and days in circulating books at the South among *white* people who cannot read—and with happy effects.

“MENTAL ALIMENT.—On the James River lives an elderly woman in indigent circumstances, and with few opportunities for religious instruction. Her brother, who is a blacksmith, resides some two miles distant, with no intervening road except it be a bridle path through the woods. He was visited by a colporteur of the American Tract Society, and induced to purchase Baxter's Saint's Rest, although he could not read a line. As soon as his day's work was done, he hied across the fields to inform his sister of the new treasure, and to secure her aid in unfolding it. She could read a little by *spelling* the words containing more than one syllable. Soon after sundown, they had gathered the few neighbors, as ignorant as themselves, and she began her task. It was twelve o'clock before the blacksmith returned to his home—and in all that time they had, by dint of effort, read about half a chapter! When he saw the colporteur the next day, he was full of his praises of the book, and requested him to go to his sister's, who wanted another. When the colporteur made his way to her door, and explained the object of his visit, she thanked him cordially, and spoke of the profit derived from the few pages she had read. “Why,” said she, “I have felt ever since, *as if my mind had eaten something.*”

8. While we are doing so much to relieve the people of a distant nation, who are suffering a famine of bread, why shall we not hasten to relieve the millions of our own countrymen, who endure, from the cradle to the grave, the far more terrible calamity, the hunger of the soul, or *famine of the Word of God!*

V.—*There is a strong feeling at the South, which may be relied on for efficient cōoperation.*

1. The Rev. John C. Young, D.D., president of the College at Danville, Ky., preached a sermon in the Presbyterian church, which was published by the members of the church, in 1846, in which he urges the duty of masters to their slaves, in “teaching and encouraging them to read God's Word.” He denies that we have any right, “for the sake of perpetuat-

ing a system which we imagine to be gainful, to keep a whole race of our fellow men in such a state of degradation as to debar them from all direct access to God's Word, and thus fearfully multiply the chances of their eternal perdition.

"No iniquitous or Heaven-insulting laws have ever been passed among us, making it penal to teach any of God's creatures to read the messages which he himself has sent to them. We have not so far imitated the Pope of Rome, as to make the Bible a sealed book to those under our authority. Were a law of this kind in existence, we should feel bound to regard it just as far as we would a law forbidding us to feed the hungry, or clothe the naked.

"What pious or philanthropic heart could countenance, even for a moment, the existence of a system, whose existence depended on excluding its subjects for ever from obeying the divine command to 'search the Scriptures,' in which alone we 'have eternal life.'

"Can you think (I appeal to the conscience of every Christian), that you are giving to your servants what is 'just and equal,' while you are taking no measures to enable them to share in a privilege of such priceless value?"

Surely, a church which publishes such sentiments, will be ready to coöperate, by giving the Bible to the slaves in its own neighborhood. And when once the work is begun, systematically and in earnest, it must go on until it is complete. There is then no line at which it can be stopped.

#### VI.—*The work is already begun.*

While the general testimony proves that the great body of slaves are intentionally kept from the Bible, and from the ability to read it, the fact that some are supplied shows that nothing but a united effort is needed to extend the blessing to all.

1. At a meeting of the American Bible Society at Cincinnati in 1843, a gentleman, whose name is not given in the published reports, said "he had often done it without opposition or molestation," and if his northern friends would "raise funds for the specific purpose of distributing Bibles among the colored people," he would "pledge himself to take charge of such funds, and faithfully appropriate every dollar."

2. The editor of the Philadelphia Observer, who formerly resided in Virginia, says, Nov. 26, 1846, "The door is thrown wide open for preaching the gospel to the slaves. In some portions of the Southern country, they are taught by their masters to read the Bible."

3 A gentleman writes from Louisville, to the New York Observer, Feb., 1847, that he found in that city, "seven Sabbath schools in successful operation among the colored population," and "God has blessed their efforts with encouraging success; multitudes have learned to read the Word of God." It is understood that similar efforts are followed with similar results, in St. Louis. What is wanting but a concerted effort, with the blessing of God, to extend this supply, from these two starting points, all over the land.

VII.—*What we should all do to promote it.*

1. Let us take it for granted that all who believe and love the Bible, are ready to co-operate in this work, as far as they have the ability, whenever its claims are fairly understood.

2. Let us act, in all respects, as if we believed it to be a work that God requires and that is surely to be done.

3. Let us freely and fully express our sentiments, and the interest we feel in the matter, with Christian meekness and fidelity, in all those ways, at those times, and through those channels, which are ordinarily found fitted to arouse public attention, to correct public opinion, and to produce general and united action.

4. Let us without delay give our money to the American Bible Society, as an earnest of our sincerity—as evidence that we believe the thing is going to be done, and that we have confidence in our brethren, and as a pledge of our readiness to support the effort to any extent it may require.

No other measure will have half the efficacy of this, in giving to the movement the desired weight, stability, and power, both to call out the liberality of the North, and to open the way and secure the requisite co-operation at the South.

Just imagine the effect that would be produced by sending donations to the Society from ten thousand churches, of different names, for this specific purpose! "THE SLAVE'S BIBLE FUND" will not long lie idle; and it will be all needed, and much more, in supplying the three millions of American slaves with the Bible.

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Published by the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society.

WILLIAM HARNED, PUBLISHING AGENT,

Being No. 1 of a series of Tracts recommended to the friends of God and man, for general circulation throughout the land. Price, one mill per page.